

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a group of diverse school children. In the foreground, a young boy with short dark hair is smiling and looking upwards. Behind him, several other children of various ethnicities are also smiling and looking in the same direction. The background is dark and out of focus.

Just f<sup>or</sup> the Kids

# School Improvement Service

Based on  
**Student Achievement Data  
and Evidence-Based Practices**

Featuring  
direct mentoring  
by high-performing  
leaders and teachers  
in the state

# Our Goal

Our goal at the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) is to support school efforts to reach excellence—to raise academic expectations and to promote those practices that will help more students reach those expectations. The *Just for the Kids School Information Service* is the process we have created to accomplish this goal in your state.

Using knowledge gained from the study of approximately 500 school systems across the country, NCEA's purpose in preparing this service is to inform and inspire—and ultimately improve—student achievement. School and district teams participating in this service will:

## INFORM *Inform*

Receive clear and specific information about current student performance levels compared to the highest performing schools with similar student populations

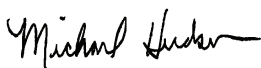
## INSPIRE *Inspire*

Study the practices of high-performing schools with similar student populations and compare their practices

## IMPROVE *Improve*

Set clear and specific student achievement goals, target practices for improvement, and receive mentoring from high-performing leaders to determine “next steps”

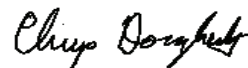
Through our partnership with schools and districts, we believe we can help create a culture of learning and develop a continuous improvement process that supports high expectations and will lead to the academic achievement results all of us desire for our students.



Mike Hudson, J.D.  
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# Just the Kids

## School Improvement Service

### Using Student Achievement Data and Evidence-Based Practices to Improve Performance

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**Mike Hudson**  
NCEA President

# Who We Are

## The National Center for Educational Accountability

In October of 2001, JFTK partnered with The University of Texas at Austin and the Education Commission of the States to establish the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA). Our mission is to develop and distribute the information and tools that will enable every school community to use test results and data-based research evidence from successful schools to raise academic standards and to increase student achievement.

Along with the public dissemination of *Just for the Kids (JFTK) School Reports*, NCEA focuses its efforts on identifying and researching the practices of high-performing school systems and translating that research into resources that can help districts and schools move toward operations that close any existing achievement gaps while raising academic standards for all students.

## Just for the Kids [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org)

Just for the Kids is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1995 in Texas to raise academic standards and to increase student achievement. JFTK developed a comprehensive, data-driven school improvement model that analyzes student achievement data to determine benchmarks for individual schools. Under this model, high-performing schools are identified and investigated to document the practices contributing to their success. In 1999, the study of high-performing schools and systems was expanded to states beyond Texas, and in October 2001 the maintenance and expansion of the *JFTK School Improvement Service* was undertaken by NCEA.

## Education Commission of the States [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is an interstate compact founded in 1965 to help state leaders shape education policy. Over fifty staff members provide policy information on all education issues through the ECS web site; host state, regional and national policy conferences; provide customized state technical assistance; create publications; and form networks and partnerships to expand ECS' reach.

## The University of Texas at Austin [www.utexas.edu](http://www.utexas.edu)

The University of Texas at Austin is a comprehensive research university with a broad mission of undergraduate and graduate education, research, and service to society. The innovation, creativity, and quality of research and scholarship underway at UT-Austin is reflected in the \$500 million awarded in sponsored research for University faculty and researchers annually. The University is at the forefront of exploration in emerging fields in the sciences, engineering, and technology, as well as in the arts and humanities.

# What We Believe

## Use Data and Best Practices to Improve Performance

“Accountability and improvement  
can be effectively interwoven.” -- Michael Fullan<sup>1</sup>

“Processes exist for results - and  
results should inform processes.” -- Mike Schmoker<sup>2</sup>

Our goal is to provide information and tools to assist in structuring a system that will lead ALL students to high levels of achievement. The key concept behind our work is benchmarking – comparisons with the best. Comparing performance with that of the most successful schools facing equally difficult challenges, comparing practices with those that distinguish successful schools, and using knowledge gained from these processes to guide deliberate action resulting in greater student achievement.

## Inform: JFTK School Reports

Making informed decisions about how to narrow the achievement gap requires good data and the skills to analyze them. Using the *JFTK School Reports*, you will be able to benchmark or compare your student performance results in each grade and subject with those of the highest performing schools serving similar or more disadvantaged populations or—if you choose—with the highest performing schools in the state. These reports compare the achievement levels of your continuously enrolled students<sup>3</sup> as well as your academic growth (which takes into account “where students started”.) They also help you identify what is possible for students in your school based on what other schools facing equally difficult challenges have been able to accomplish. This information ensures that your school improvement goals are set at appropriately high levels.

The value of comparisons with top performers is illustrated by the story of Carlos, a sophomore student recalling his first MATHCOUNTS competition where his understanding of “*what is possible*” dramatically changed.

*When Carlos was in 7th grade, he was a member of his school’s MATHCOUNTS competitive math team. The team was comprised of the strongest 7th grade math students in the school.*

*For several months leading up to the competition, Carlos and his teammates studied several times a week after school. The math teacher who volunteered to coach the school’s MATHCOUNTS team noticed that Carlos improved his performance on each week’s practice test. With time and hard work, Carlos became the top math student on his team. Relative to the other students on his team, Carlos consistently outperformed his peers on the final few practice tests immediately preceding the regional competition. Based on his experience at his school, Carlos entered the MATHCOUNTS competition confident that his hard work and dedication would lead to success at the regional level.*

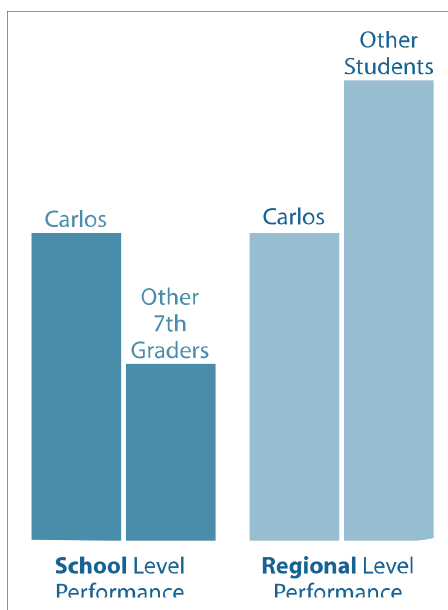
<sup>1</sup> Fullan, M.B. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teacher’s College Press.

<sup>2</sup> Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia p.4.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/EKF/images/LeadingIndicators.pdf>



*During the competition, Carlos quickly realized that he was not nearly as well prepared for the competition as students from other schools. Carlos was frustrated to learn that 4th grade students from other schools knew as much or even more than he did about math. The MATHCOUNTS competition changed his vision about what was possible in mathematics achievement in a way that would never have occurred if his team simply practiced without competing against other schools.*



Once student performance results is compared with those of the highest performing schools serving similar or more disadvantaged populations, you may ask, **“What is it that schools getting these types of results are doing?”** Answering that question has been the subject of our school and system best practice studies for the past five years.

## Inspire: JFTK Best Practice Framework and Self-Audits

**“Just because schools didn’t cause the problem doesn’t mean they can’t solve it.” --Meredith Phillips<sup>4</sup>**

While educators often have rich information on the strategies used in their own school, they may have little information about the strategies or practices in other schools—particularly the specific practices of consistently high-performing schools.

To help provide this information, we have researched the practices of approximately 500 schools and systems chosen based on a careful analysis that identifies consistent school

<sup>4</sup> Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). The black-white test score gap: An introduction. In C. Jencks and M. Phillips (Eds.), *The black-white test score gap* (pp. 1-51). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Pp. 43-46

performance over multiple years, in multiple subjects. We have also studied the findings of experts in effective schools research—most notably, Dr. Larry Lezotte of Effective Schools in Okemos, Michigan. Lezotte and Levine’s *Unusually Effective Schools*<sup>5</sup> remains a classic in the review and analysis of research related to effective school practices.

Our best practice findings collected over the past five years are drawn from the case studies of the schools we have visited. Based on an analysis of those studies, we have structured our findings into five broad themes and have identified how, in effective schools and districts, the labor in each theme is intentionally divided across three levels—district, school, and classroom. This structure, *The JFTK Best Practice Framework*, has proven to be a powerful way to organize the information on the practices of high-performing school systems, and to understand how outside circumstances, such as levels of parental involvement or community support, affect the practices in each area.

The *JFTK Self-Audits* enable one to compare their specific practices in each of the five theme areas by district, school, and classroom levels, to those practices found in consistently high-performing schools but less so in average-performing schools.

Though our qualitative findings, as embodied in *The Framework* and the *Self-Audits*, do not prove causal relationships between specific school activities and increased student achievement, they provide a menu of promising strategies for educators to explore. We also draw from the knowledge base of experimental studies and research wherever it exists. We are strong advocates of making decisions informed by the best available evidence in the current knowledge base.

## Improve: JFTK School Improvement Planning and Action Tools

The *JFTK School Improvement Service* provides a strong informational and organizational tool to carefully consider all current school improvement efforts in light of demonstrated effectiveness in a school as well as in light of the practices of “the best” in our industry. It does not offer yet another activity, program, or training to add to already overfilled agendas of improvement efforts. It does offer a method for organizing and evaluating all current improvement activities and programs and for measuring the extent to which they mirror the practices of high-performing schools.

To assist with a school or district’s effort to implement practices of high-performing schools, we offer:

- mentoring by educators from the identified high-performing school systems,
- interactive training sessions with web-based resources,
- specialized interview guides for gathering strategic information from high-performing school systems,
- improvement planning templates aligned to federal and state guidelines, and,
- formative and summative monitoring and evaluation services.

By benchmarking student achievement results and school system practices against the highest performing comparable schools, *JFTK School Improvement Service* participants are preparing for “breakthrough improvement!”

<sup>5</sup> Levine, D.U. and Lezotte, L.W. (1990) *Unusually effective schools: A review and analysis of research and practice*. Madison, WI: National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development.

## What We Do

Use Student  
Achievement Data to  
Guide Improvement and  
Evaluate Progress

*Inform*

1

2

*Inspire*

Study Practices  
of High-Performing  
School Systems

3

*Improve*

Convert  
Knowledge  
into Action



# 1

## *Inform*

We believe that all improvement begins with an honest and diligent effort to understand a school's current reality relative to student achievement data. Using *JFTK School Reports* to review student achievement levels compared to schools with similar student populations that are reaching higher achievement levels will forge this understanding.

# 2

## *Inspire*

Once a deep understanding of current reality in terms of student achievement has been developed—as well as a rich vision of the student achievement results that are possible—we next provide tools to examine and compare the practices and behaviors that have produced these levels of achievement to the practices and behaviors of high-performing schools.

# 3

## *Improve*

Having evaluated student achievement and school practices objectively—a school's current reality—we next help set student academic goals and target the practices to reach these goals.

## 1

*Inform*

Use Student  
Achievement Data to  
Guide Improvement and  
Evaluate Progress

**E**nsuring all students reach high levels of academic achievement is the intent of the *JFTK School Improvement Service*. In Step 1 of this process, you will develop a deep understanding of your current reality relative to student achievement data. A thorough review of your school's student achievement levels (Reality of Student Achievement) compared to schools with similar student populations that are reaching higher achievement levels (Proven Student Achievement) will forge this understanding. The contrast between proven high performance and your current reality establishes the structural tension necessary to reach your goals.

**Proven Student Achievement Levels.** Consider the proven performance levels of students in high-performing schools with student populations that are similar to yours.

**Reality of Student Achievement.** Evaluate the current reality of your student achievement data objectively—without an agenda. All improvement begins with a deep understanding of your current reality.

Observe the contrast between proven student achievement levels and the reality of student achievement in your school. If other schools are reaching higher levels of student achievement with similar student populations, you have proof that you can do this also. Our *School Improvement Service* identifies this gap in performance and also provides an ongoing process designated to help you eliminate it.

## 2

*Inspire*

Study Practices  
of High-Performing  
School Systems

**A**fter establishing the tension between your current student achievement levels and the proven performance levels of high-performing schools serving similar student populations, it is important to study the school system practices that led to those different levels of performance.

**High-Performing School Practices.** Studies of over 500 school systems have identified the general practices of high-performing schools. These extensive studies continue to add evidence to the fact that it is the **school's response** to “what a student brings to school” rather than “what the student brings” that determines achievement.

**Your School Practices.** An objective look at your student achievement must be followed by an open assessment of the system that is producing that level of achievement. A careful study of your system practices completes the picture of your current reality and helps frame the improvement process.

NCEA acknowledges that school system practices must first and foremost be informed by scientifically based research when it is available, and also, by the known principles of cognitive science. However, we also believe that our school research, which now includes visits to over 500 carefully identified school systems, can and does add valuable knowledge that will lead to even greater consensus about what works to increase achievement for all students.

If there is a performance gap, there is a practice gap. Compare your practices to the general practices of high-performing schools. This step can help you determine how to proceed to improve student achievement in your school.

**H**aving evaluated your current reality objectively—both your student achievement data and the practices that produced that achievement data—you will now be able to set student achievement goals and target the practices that you will use to reach these goals. After you determine your student achievement goals and areas of need, you will have access to educators from high-performing schools to help you decide your practical course of action.

Educators traditionally “know” a lot, “plan” a lot, and certainly “do” a lot. Carefully and deliberately connecting these activities (when knowledge is based on data and proven practice) builds the foundation for true school improvement.

In Step 3 of the *JFTK School Improvement Service*, you will concentrate on using the knowledge that you have gained about your data and practices to develop a focused and intentional plan that will result in “doing” - in changes in the behavior of adults in your organization and subsequently in changes in the achievement of students.

# 3

## *Improve*

Convert  
Knowledge  
into Action



# What Our School Service Includes

# 1

## *Inform*

Use Student  
Achievement Data to  
Guide Improvement and  
Evaluate Progress

### SERVICES

- Pre-assessment of *JFTK School Reports*
  - *One* 6-hour data analysis
  - Post-assessment of *JFTK School Reports*
  - Additional intervention sessions
  - *JFTK School Reports* mastery
  - *One* 1-hour mentoring session with high-performing principal
- 

# 2

## *Inspire*

Study Practices  
of High-Performing  
School Systems

- Self-Audit analysis and reporting
  - *Three* 6-hour best practice training sessions
  - District Practice Summary Report
- 

# 3

## *Improve*

Convert  
Knowledge  
into Action

- *Two* 3-hour planning sessions
- Three hours of mentoring with three high-performing principals
- Formative implementation monitoring
- Summarize implementation evaluation

## TOOLS

- **Step 1 handbook including:**
  - Gap Analysis Charts
  - Growth Analysis Charts
  - Consistently High-Performing Schools Analysis Charts
  - Student Achievement Data Worksheet
- **Step 1 CD: Analysis Charts and PowerPoint Presentation—Student Achievement Data**

## OTHER

- **Help Desk**
- **Data Consultation**

- 
- **Step 2 handbook including:**
    - Best Practice Framework
    - Self-Audits of High-Performing School System Practices (15)
  - **School Practices Worksheet**
  - **Step 2 CD: Best Practice Framework, Self Audits, and PowerPoint Presentation—High-Performing Practices**

- **Help Desk**
- **Data Consultation**

- 
- **Step 3 handbook including:**
    - Turning Knowledge into Action Planning Guide
    - High-Performing School Interview Protocols
  - **High-Performing School Site Visit Guide**
    - School Improvement Planning Template
  - **Step 3 CD: Interview Protocols, Planning Template, and PowerPoint Presentation—Enacting our School Improvement Plan**

- **Help Desk**
- **Site Visit Coordination**
- **Tailored Site Visit Protocol**

# Projected Timeline

## 1 Inform

Use Student  
Achievement Data to  
Guide Improvement and  
Evaluate Progress

**September**  
Data Pre-tests (1a)

**October**  
Data Training (1b)

**November**  
Data Post-tests  
and Certification  
(1b)  
  
Intervention and  
Mentoring as  
needed (2c)

- (1) All school staff and designated district staff
- (2) Any staff member needing additional instruction

## 2 Inspire

Study Practices  
of High-Performing  
School Systems

**December**  
Self-Audits (1a)

**January**  
Best Practice  
Training (1b)  
  
Your School  
Practices  
Worksheet (3b)

- (3) School leadership team
- (4) Principal or designee from school leadership team

## 3 Improve

Convert  
Knowledge  
into Action

**February**  
Improvement  
Planning Training  
Session One (3b)

**March**  
Mentoring  
Interviews (4c)

**April**  
Improvement  
Planning Training  
Session Two (3b)

**May**  
Finalize Plan

**June**  
Implement

**July**  
Implement

- (a) Individually, online
- (b) Group, in person
- (c) Individually, email, phone



# Online Supplements

As part of the *JFTK School Improvement Service*, we have created a special web portal for schools to easily access additional information about school data and best practice. This portal provides simple navigation to site content directly related to the Service. The entire range of our content is accessible to the public at [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

The following additional **charts** and **resources** are available through our special web portal to supplement the custom data reports and other materials (*see page 13 of this information brochure*) already included in the *JFTK School Improvement Service* handbook.

## Gap Analysis Charts

- **Best in State Charts**—In cases where you have strong, positive opportunity gaps, your top comparable schools may not be the best comparison. Instead, use the Best in State charts to see how the best schools in the state, regardless of student demographics, are doing.
- **Top Comparable Schools Selection Criteria**—Our method of determining top comparable schools is explained in greater detail.
- **More Detail Tables**—Additional information about the student makeup of your tested student population or the tested population of your top comparable schools is available.

## Consistently High-Performing Schools Analysis Charts

- **Additional Year Scatter Plot Charts**—The methodology for identifying consistently high-performing schools includes three years of data. Only one year of scatter plot charts is included in these materials, but you can access other years on the web.
- **Geographic Distribution Map**—The state's high-performing schools are mapped so that you can see their distribution across the state.
- **Identification Criteria**—The methodology for identifying high-performing schools is explained, and the results of validation research is posted.

## Best Practice Framework

- **Evidence Search**—This feature allows you to search the database of documents for examples from schools that are similar to your school based on a number of demographic criteria.
- **State and National Best Practice Studies**—The National Center for Educational Accountability coordinates studies of schools in many states and across states. You can access the results of other state or national studies to compare the findings and see additional examples of best practice documents.

# **National Center for Educational Accountability**

national sponsor of Just  for the Kids

**To receive registration and other information concerning availability of  
our *School Improvement Service* in your state, logon to  
[www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org) and *Contact Us* via [info@just4kids.org](mailto:info@just4kids.org)**

The National Center for Educational Accountability is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose founding organizations include Just for the Kids, The University of Texas at Austin and the Education Commission of the States. Your comments are important to us. 512-232-0770, 4030-2 West Braker Lane, Suite 200W, Austin, TX 78759; [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

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